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ABSTRACT

College admissions requirements can be a powerful force toward improved student achievement in high schools and colleges. In January of 1982, California State University adopted more rigorous admission requirements, to become effective in the fall of 1984. Since that decision, morale of high school teachers has improved, and expectations and course criteria have influenced course content. College professors have worked closely with their high school counterparts to devise curricula, understand each other's problems, and participate in summer institutes. In addition to secondary/postsecondary collaboration, the involvement of the private sector has produced funds. Prior to the admissions change, a series of exploratory discussions with high school and junior high school teachers, counselors, administrators, and school board members was conducted. Thus, university faculties and high school staff participated in shaping the specifics of the new requirements, and the response by those in secondary education has been positive. Finally, it can be assumed that higher admission standards will not necessarily jeopardize college enrollments; rather, the expectation is that few students will be blocked by more requirements, and more will persist due to better preparation. (BJD)

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College Admissions Requirements: A Contribution to Mediocrity or a Boost to Achievement in High Schools and Colleges

I am grateful to the sponsors of this national forum for the opportunity to express my views on this important subject. I believe that college admissions requirements can be a powerful force toward improved student achievement in high schools and colleges. When admission standards are carefully conceived, developed in consultation with high school representatives, clearly stated, and implemented with reasonable lead time, they can have a profound influence on curriculum standards and expectations for both high school and college students. And I am convinced that admission standards can be raised without seriously jeopardizing college enrollments or blunting student affirmative action efforts. The key is that changes must be based upon a general understanding of their purpose and meaning by teachers, students, and administrators.

Before I expand on these views I want to pause to remind ourselves that despite the current outcry from the many reports bemoaning the sorry state of American education, there is much that is right. And what isn't right is being worked on at many levels, in new and innovative ways, and through an expanded partnership that involves the schools, higher education, the private sector and government at all levels.

Looking at the big picture there is much about which we can be extremely proud. In 1950, less than half of America's young people graduated from high school. In 1977, the proportion exceeded 80%, and it is still increasing. In 1950, only 10% of Black students graduated from high school; by 1977, the rate was 76%. In 1980, the U.S. had more of its 15 to 18 year olds in school than any other country in the world.

This higher level of education has had an impact on college and university attendance as well. In 1910, the average 25 year old American had completed 8.1 years of school. By 1950, the figure was 9.3 and by 1980, it was 12.5. In 1965, the percentage of Black high school graduates going on to college was one-third that of whites. By 1980 the percentage of Black high school graduates going to college actually exceeded that of whites, although the proportion of high school graduates who were Black had not decreased. In all, more than 12 million Americans are now enrolled in some form of postsecondary education. In California, 62% of high school graduates go on to some form of advanced study. If it is in fact true that 50 years ago the nation's college students were brighter, it is hardly surprising. Most people of "college age" were not in college at all.

But, the fact that we have achieved much does not excuse us from recognizing shortcomings and accepting our share of responsibility for them. Until recently, most large public universities have not sent very clear messages to the high schools concerning what is expected of entering students, what they need to know to benefit. Well articulated admission standards can contribute to much needed clarity. Moreover, admission standards help to determine what colleges can expect to accomplish with the students they get.

In January 1982 the CSU adopted more rigorous admission requirements for entering freshmen, including four years of college-preparatory English and two years of college-preparatory math in addition to the standing grade and test score requirements. Although these new standards are not effective until fall 1984, already we are receiving reports from the high schools that the students are enrolling in more solids, teachers are raising their expectations of students, and parents are showing greater interest in their children's education. We also understand that the morale of high school English and math teachers is beginning to improve, and that the expectations statement and course criteria are beginning to influence course content.

In the CSU, we are not really asking for more years of study in English and math so much as we are insisting upon more substantial course content so that those years will yield acceptable skills and competency levels to enable students to realize the maximum benefit from their college experience. This was a first step and we have a way to go.

But establishing specific course requirements alone does not automatically ensure that students will be well prepared. For this reason, many states and individual institutions are providing more specifics on what the outcomes of a college-preparatory curriculum should be.

The College Board's Educational Quality Project is taking that message not only to the high schools, but to the students and their parents as well. In a major report released in May ("What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do"), the College Board outlined the skills and knowledge needed for success in college. The EQ Project is being used as a framework to improve the preparation of high school students in 10 states stretching from California to Rhode Island.

Within The California State University, professors in English, math and social sciences already work closely with their counterparts in local high schools to devise curricula, and they sometimes exchange classes to get a better understanding of each other's problems. Many public school teachers come to our campuses for summer institutes such as the California Mathematics Project and the California Writing Project where they can not only improve their skills but also gain a sense that what they are doing is important.

But there is more that can be done, not only through more secondary postsecondary collaboration, but also through the involvement of the private sector. In California, three corporate foundations -- the Atlantic Richfield Foundation, the BankAmerica Foundation, and California Casualty Insurance -- have provided funds to produce a special booklet for eighth graders on "Making High School Count." This booklet is one of the projects of the California Round Table for Educational Opportunity. The Round Table is an association of the chief executives of the systems of higher education, public and private, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and the director of California's coordinating agency. In addition to the eighth grade booklet, the Round Table is distributing 35,000 copies of a "Statement on Competencies Expected in English and Mathematics of Entering Freshmen" to school boards, superintendents, counselors, principals, English and math department chairs, and others. It was developed by representatives of the faculty senates of three public segments of higher education, plus leadership from K-12.

The way in which higher admission standards are developed and implemented is important in determining their impact on the high school curriculum. Those of us in higher education must ensure that the school-college partnerships are truly cooperative ventures to avoid colleges simply dictating curricula to the high schools. If all parties come to these discussions as full partners, the time should not be distant when secondary and postsecondary curriculum will be one continuous fabric because it will be jointly developed and maintained.

We have tried to keep these points in mind as the CSU has developed its admission changes. Finger pointing has been rare. After all, it is not the fault of the schools alone, and the CSU trains most of the teachers for California. There has been a degree of participation that was unheard of a decade ago. Not only have the university faculties been involved in defining the standards, but high school English and math teachers, curriculum specialists, school administrators, and representatives of minority organizations having a special interest in education have all played important roles in shaping the specifics of CSU requirements.

We began by conducting a series of exploratory discussions with high school and junior high school teachers, counselors, administrators, and school board members. After the changes were adopted in principle, staff held public meetings around the state, and attended statewide counselor conferences to explain our approach and obtain insights from high school representatives on implementation matters and further refinements. The content of college-preparatory English and math courses was developed in discussions with key high school teachers throughout the state. Their proposed criteria were adopted with minor modifications. Then selected faculty made presentations at professional meetings of teachers of English and math as well as district and countywide meetings called by curriculum coordinators.

Secondary education's response has been overwhelmingly positive. This, however, should not mask the fact that serious fiscal and personnel problems are causing anxiety about whether the demands can be met. There are problems with five-period days, too few teachers, and too few dollars. Math teachers are a special shortage.

Finally, we must not assume that higher admission standards will hurt college enrollments. It is my observation that institutions with well-defined missions, clearly articulated programs, and challenging instruction, have plenty of well-qualified applicants. I submit that students, schools, and parents will meet and support higher standards. In reading the various reports on the health of American schools, I have noted that it is the students who have been most outspoken on the fact that not enough has been expected of them. As Ohio's Chancellor Edward Moulton commented (Newsweek, May 9, 1983), "Anyone who has raised children knows that they would rather play basketball than mow the grass, but if they know that they must mow the grass they will."

And just as I do not see higher college admission requirements jeopardizing overall college enrollments, I do not see higher standards and student affirmative action as being antithetical. We have examined the concern that access of students from underrepresented groups to higher education would suffer from higher standards. In California the facts suggest otherwise. A study of a sample of transcripts of the 1978-79 entering CSU freshmen found very little difference in the high school course patterns of students meeting regular admission standards and those admitted as exceptions.

John Goodlad found in his recent study of American high schools that most schools track in at least the three or four basic subjects required for college admission. He discovered that students programmed into the upper tracks receive most of the benefits. The students programmed into the general or vocational curriculum are usually poor and from minority groups; the college prep students are disproportionately Anglo and affluent. He stresses that the curriculum is not what high schools offer, it is what students take.

Too often a student's ethnicity or socio-economic level results in him or her being shunted into general science rather than chemistry or physics, or into general math instead of algebra or geometry. What high school graduates need is now being communicated to minorities along with their majority counterparts. Further, the ongoing conversations about standards have made school people more aware of some of the current practices.

There will always be a need for exceptions and probably for special programs (such as EOP) and appropriate phase-in provisions for late bloomers and for "educationally and economically" disadvantaged, but in balance we expect few to be blocked by new requirements and more to persist due to better preparation.

The primary purpose of changing admission standards in the CSU has been to influence high school curriculum -- and to the extent we are successful in that effort, the ranking and sorting at the secondary level will be based on what a student has learned, rather than seat time, test scores, or whether he has the good fortune to attend a high school in a district that has offered truly college prep courses. In other words, our actions should increase the equity of the ranking and sorting process that is inevitable. Higher quality education at all levels is the only sure route to genuine educational equity.

After a long slide, then, quality is in again, along with designer clothing, condominiums, and racquetball. It is trendy, up-scale, just the thing to capture the American imagination and launch a new era of excellence in our educational system, K through postgraduate. Higher education's interest in the welfare of the high schools is not altruistic. The potential for colleges to have an impact on their students is directly related to the quality of their previous preparation. One important way for higher education to reinforce the widespread and encouraging efforts of our high school colleagues to improve the quality of their programs is by adopting admission standards which influence curriculum content. And I remain convinced that this stand for quality will not jeopardize enrollments or our affirmative action efforts.